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## Chapter 10

# Comics, Dolls and the Disavowal of Racism: Learning from Mexican Mestizaje\*

*Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa and Emiko Saldivar Tanaka\**

## Introduction

‘Mestizaje’ and ‘creolization’ are parallel and competing terms. Both refer to processes and discourses of mixture, racial and cultural, emanating from colonial encounters in the Americas. Moreover, mestizaje also refers to nineteenth- and twentieth-century political projects with varying degrees of institutionalization. Mestizaje is an ambitious idea that aims to represent the inauguration of modernity to which the contact between Europe, America, Asia and Africa gave precedent. It is, simultaneously, a living and shifting process of racial miscegenation, cultural transformation and nation-building. Mestizaje has moved beyond the realm of linguistics, culture and identity of creolization, to include a top-down official political dimension that has rewritten national histories in order to cohere nation states in Latin America.

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\* The order of the authors’ names is alphabetical and does not reflect any differences in work involvement or value.

\*\* We would like to thank the editors of this volume, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Shirley Anne Tate, Serge Gruzinski and Hettie Malcomson for their helpful suggestions.

The focus of this chapter is not to make yet another rhetorical comparison of the differences or similarities of each term and propose either a new term or emphasize the benefits or disadvantages of creolization against *mestizaje* or vice versa (Kraidy, 2005; Cohen and Toninato, 2010; Baron and Cara, 2011; Lionnet and Shi, 2011). While we favor *mestizaje* as it speaks to the Latin American context and at least parts of the Caribbean experience, we want to concentrate on the consequences of official processes of institutionalization of mixture and offer this analysis to the propagators of a political project of European creolization.

However, there are four assumptions around both terms that are worth clarifying. First, we are particularly interested in exposing Europe to the Mexican experience of *mestizaje* as in both contexts we are dealing with local practices, identities and histories constantly encountering migrating peoples from all over the globe. This is because, on the one hand, creolization can be limiting. Creolization focuses on African and European presences on Caribbean soil creating a distinctive colonial and postcolonial 'third space' (Hall, 2010). It presupposes a land empty of the Indigenous population and does not include a history of Asian indentureship. Both these latter groups figure far less in Anglophone and Francophone theorizations of creolization than the master European and African signifiers. On the other hand, historically, *mestizaje* concerns the interaction between Europeans and Africans with the local Amerindian peoples (in a simultaneous Iberian dialogue with Asia, see Gruzinski 2002; 2010). So, with *mestizaje*, rather than the emergence of a new third space that becomes the creolized world, we are dealing with strategies that have crossed the biological, cultural and political arenas to deal with the local, the indigenous. This issue is a shortcoming of the concept of creolization as it does not take into account the Indigenous inhabitants, and even if the claim that all Indigenous peoples disappeared was to be accepted, it is not methodologically and historically viable to ignore the emptiness created by the Indigenous absence.<sup>1</sup> In the cases of Europe and Mexico and more broadly in Latin America, there has been a continuous indigenous local presence that is essential for the new set of relations that are being created. However, there are core distinct power dynamics at play. Whereas in Latin America, the Indigenous peoples and African slaves were at a clear disadvantage in relation to the colonial powers, contemporary European local Indigenous peoples appear as powerfully 'resisting' the incoming waves of 'others' that threaten their core whiteness and melancholic imperial past (El-Tayeb, 2011; McVeigh, 2010).

Secondly, it is clear to us that an analysis of the politics of knowledge production and circulation in contemporary academia can offer a glimpse into why some terms become more fashionable than others in specific contexts. Addressing questions such as who gets translated into which

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1 We would like to thank Serge Gruzinski for pointing us to this issue.

language, what gets circulated and who has the power to do so can help us situate the relevance and 'fame' of specific sets of ideas. We attempt this analysis well aware of the broader dynamics within which discussions and theories of both creolization and mestizaje are located.

Thirdly, while the context of this book is to discuss the possibility of the creolization of Europe, our contribution aims to problematize the celebratory tone of such an endeavor, especially if it is to be considered a political project. Such a proposal has resonances with, for example, the wariness some academics have about claims that the USA can learn from Latin American racially and culturally mixed societies and somehow guarantee social conviviality (see, for example, Wade, 2004, 355). There is much to learn from the Latin American experience, where the experiment of globalization and dealing with difference has been in the making for 500 years (Gruzinski, 2002).

Finally, beyond the demographic argument whereby mestizaje is more representative of a wider population and territory than creolization, it is important to highlight that both terms are being reproduced in very different kinds of contexts. While mestizaje first emerges in colonial settings which have over 200 years of postcolonial life, many Caribbean societies from where the notion of creolization emanates are still, or were, living under various forms of colonial rule into the twentieth century.

With these four assumptions in place, and acknowledging that each deserves its own investigation beyond this chapter, our interest here is to introduce and discuss mestizaje as a racial project as it emerged in Latin America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and explore its potential lessons to the project of the creolization of Europe. The version of mestizaje we want to focus on was a response to dealing with difference and a way of imposing a homogenizing sense of nation to diverse groups. Such a version was in part only possible as a continuation of the colonial experience even if it simultaneously enters into conflict with the fluidity of mestizo creativity and the possibilities of cultural mixture (Gruzinski, 2002). Official mestizaje can speak to the project of creolizing Europe in two ways: on the one hand, there is an emerging institutionalization of ideas around cultural diversity that conceal social, political and economic inequality.<sup>2</sup> In this process of formalizing the ways in which diversity is to be managed, Europe can learn from the mistakes and opportunities that official mestizaje brought to Mexico and various Latin American countries where similar policies were developed in the early twentieth century and whose consequences are deeply felt today. On the other hand, the racial project of mestizaje, paralleling what appears to be a project of creolization, had simultaneous logics of inclusion and exclusion operating under the

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2 'Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Policies in France', *Compendium*: [www.culturalpolicies.net/web/france.php?aid=424](http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/france.php?aid=424). Accessed March 18, 2012.

ideal of national conviviality (Wade, 2005; Saldivar, 2008; Moreno Figueroa, 2010). We are not saying that the project of creolization aims to homogenize European populations going through processes of encounter, mixture and diversity. We also do not want to enter into a debate about which notion – creolization or *mestizaje* – better represents our current moment, as this would deserve a whole study in itself. Rather, we believe it is key to consider what has happened when the state – the racist state – intervenes in contexts that already have cultural and social experiences of *mestizaje*, of lived and everyday mixedness, precisely by trying to institutionalize and regulate such mixtures and encounters.

We will do this by exploring state, elite and public reactions to racist expressions in Mexico, a context which has taken the model of *mestizaje* to the level of official discourse emanating from its historical colonial experience and its nation-building process. Our focus is on how such public reaction reveals the contradictory nature of what a racist state and its institutions do and allow. We want to invite the reader to suspend the belief in creolization or *mestizaje* as avenues for a fairer society, and explore and learn from a context where the project is in operation and has specific problems of racism.

In what follows we first contextualize and explore two cases. Briefly, we start with the golliwog-Thatcher controversy in 2009 in the United Kingdom and then we move on to focus on the fictional comic character *Memín Pinguín* that raised another controversy around racism, within Mexico and with the USA, in 2005. We analyze its particularities and the ways in which the case was responded to, linking this to Mexico's prevailing racial project. We then briefly expand on Mexico's racial politics and the ways in which the discourse of official *mestizaje* has determined racial recognition in Mexico and warns us over a naive enthusiasm for creolization. Overall, by pointing out the difficulties of *mestizaje* in Mexico we offer some insights to consider the limits and possibilities of a project of creolization in Europe.

### Racist reactions and expressions

In 2009, the BBC in the United Kingdom took the decision to dismiss Carol Thatcher from a television programme, 'The One Show', after she described French tennis player Jo-Wilfried Tsonga as a 'golliwog' in an off-air conversation.<sup>3</sup> This event created an intense media debate and the assertion of an overall sense that there was a clear and effective public British recognition of what is (un)acceptable in terms of racist discourse and practice. Not only

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3 'BBC defends action over Thatcher', BBC News (February 5, 2009) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7871746.stm>. Accessed January 21, 2015.

was Thatcher dismissed, but golliwog dolls were also removed from shops, including the famous Hamleys toyshop and a shop owned by the Queen.<sup>4</sup>

In the United Kingdom, it is widely accepted that anti-racism campaigning and critical academic thinking have made 'the explicit espousal of racist belief a socially unacceptable activity' (Pitcher, 2006, 536). This is witnessed by the extent to which 'the demands of anti-racism have at some level been incorporated into the structures of the state, media and civil society' (536). However, as Ben Pitcher (537) suggests:

the problem [...] with winning the language war on the question of race is that now it becomes far harder than before to challenge racist discourses that are, accordingly, obliged to find expression through the language of *multiculturalism* and *anti-racism*.

While it is not the aim of this chapter to explore at depth the British golliwog example in its success in the recognition of, but failure in ending, racism, it certainly is a good starting point to discuss a similar tension between the disavowal and recognition of racism in Mexico in a comparable case, that of *Memín Pinguín*.<sup>5</sup> Before entering into the detail of this case, we want further to emphasize why *Memín Pinguín* is relevant for the discussion of this collection. This case allows us to observe how racism operates in contexts where supposedly the acceptance of cultural and racial mixture, and even of multiculturalism, has been achieved. As stated above, we believe that the Mexican case can enlighten the project of creolization in Europe where some are betting on the belief that mixture and flux of cultures, accompanied by a politics of recognition, will effectively tackle racism. For example, Kristian Van Haesendonck (2012, 16) writes, 'I critically adhere to the potential of the concept which is the best term available so far to describe the conflictive process of cultural mixing in Europe'. This author proposes a political project of creolization for the old continent, with his main thesis being that 'the European Union does – up to certain point – have the power to propel or hinder creolisation in Europe through the power of laws and projects involving European citizenship, currency, mobility, and projects involving Europe's cultural heritage' (Van Haesendonck, 2012, 17). Although recognition is an invaluable step to dismantle the silence around

4 'Hamleys joins Queen's estate in banning golliwogs', *Guardian* (February 5, 2009) [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/05/race-monarchy](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/05/race-monarchy). Accessed January 21, 2015.

5 *Memín* is a derivative of 'Memo', which is the short name for Guillermo (William in English). *Pinguín* derives from '*pingo*', a term used to describe someone whose behaviour is characterized by childish naughtiness, and, while it could be associated with mischievousness, it has a generalized positive sense in terms of someone being charmingly roguish, playful, teasing. Q.v. 'mischievous', adj. (and n.), *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 2002; online version 2011) [www.oed.com/view/Entry/119303](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/119303). Accessed March 4, 2015.

any form of oppression, it is not enough. We believe that both cases, the reactions to *Memín Pinguín* in Mexico and the golliwog doll in the United Kingdom, share something in common – that neither national context has successfully challenged racial privilege.

Mexico's 'raceless' ideology may have overlaps with Europe's current color-blind, post-multicultural racism. However, we are interested in exploring what are the specificities of the Mexican context that make racial disavowal possible, how that disavowal is related to discourses of mestizaje and what that has to say about the tensions within approaches to mixedness. Although we do not have the capacity to discuss whether or not particular European contexts lack the ability to rethink the past in relation to their own long history of globalization and imperialism, we see this as an opportunity for learning from the processes of negotiation that the Latin American mirror reflects. Our argument is that the Mexican project of modernity is based on the denial of racial purity and the celebration of mixture, as well as on a possessive investment in the 'disavowal' of racism. And, for 'disavowal', we refer to the affirmation that one (the people, the government, the media etc.) does not know, or have responsibility for, racism (that is, the refusal of its acknowledgement).<sup>6</sup>

We do, however, take on board a key lesson from the golliwog case, that recognition does not imply the end of racism. Those that insist that there is a strong correlation between racial and class-based discrimination are right. In this analysis, then, we are incorporating a perspective that considers 'race' as social and cultural capital (in the Bourdieusean sense: see Bourdieu, 1984), where whiteness is an esteemed good, while indigenouness, brownness and blackness have a negative value that regulates and explains the social distribution of wealth, power, social status and privilege. In addition, if we concentrate on the Mexican example, much of the specificity of the disavowal of racism relies on the discourse of mestizaje. In this way, exploring mestizaje as a key component of national identity, which has become structural to social life and organization as well as everyday lived experience, offers insights into the potential limits of a wider project of creolization in contemporary societies.

### Introducing *Memín Pinguín*

*Memín Pinguín* is a fictional character of a children's comic of the same name, which first appeared in Mexico in the 1940s. It was created originally by Alberto Cabrera and later developed by Yolanda Vargas Dulché. *Memín*

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6 Q.v. 'disavowal', n. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1989; online version 2011) [www.oed.com/view/Entry/53581](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/53581). Accessed March 4, 2015. Earlier version first published as *New English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1896).

*Pinguín* was inspired by the characters in the 1886 novel *Heart*, by Edmondo De Amicis, and the American comedy short films *Our Gang* (1922–27), by Hal Roach (Monsiváis, 2008). The comic's story develops around a series of adventures where Memín is the main character alongside his three best friends, Ricardo, Ernestillo and Carlangas. All seem to be around thirteen years of age (although it is not clear if Memín is actually younger) and they attend the same school. The comic's website offers an overview of the characters, as follows. Ricardo is the rich boy of the group, blond, privileged and delicate. Ernestillo is a working-class boy, the son of a hard-working carpenter, is the best at school and the most cautious and sensible. Carlangas is an impulsive rough boy, constantly getting into trouble, apparently in response to his father's absence. Memín is described as a boy that is always saying whatever comes into his head, which makes him imprudent and funny at times. He does not think through the consequences of his actions and is sometimes rather smug. He is also described as lazy, ignorant, naive, nosy and selfish although accessible and kind to his friends (who are always hitting him on the head, but consider him their most loyal friend). Memín has a very strong relationship with his mother, Eufrosina, who is poor and supports herself and Memín by washing other people's clothes. Physically, Memín is described on the website as more caricature-like than his friends, short for his age and bald. The webpage also mentions that, at times, Memín complains about his skin color, but suggests that this is 'understandable due to the environment in which he lives, where his friends and almost everyone is always calling him "black", but not with a racist meaning, it's just that he is the "little black in the rice"' (www.meminpinguin.com).

Sixto Valencia Burgos, the artist who drew the comic, mentions the character Ebony White, from the US comic *The Spirit*, as one of the main images he researched to come up with that of Memín (Espinosa, 2005).<sup>7</sup> Overall, the representation of the character follows what has been called 'darky iconography', a wide-ranging remarkably pervasive form of representation of blackness where we can also locate the golliwog figure (Reese, 2008; Sterling, 2010). As Marvin Sterling succinctly puts it, such iconography has been globally recreated. 'This character's bulbous, whitened lips and hapless demeanor recall similar caricatures of blacks originally produced in the United States' (Sterling, 2010, 40). However, its local reincarnation and appeal in Mexico 'depend on erasures of provenance, on the sustained voicelessness of the "poorer people" who are both readily represented and underrepresented' (Sterling, 2010, 40). While it might be risky to speculate here why this character emerges within a dominant racial discourse of mestizaje, it is not too far fetched to think about how the idea of blackness as the 'only' racialized position is so much easier to articulate in precisely

7 Sixto Valencia's interview (July 12, 2008) <http://lanuez.blogspot.com/2008/07/lanuez-entrevista-don-sixto-valencia-el.html>. Accessed March 4, 2015.



the strongest historical moment of such a project in Mexico. As will be explained below, it was in the 1940s that the Mexican state's intervention to integrate Indigenous, mestizo and white populations under a national banner, avoiding a public recognition of Afro-Mexican peoples, was at its peak. The lack of stereotypical visibility of Black peoples fitted perfectly into a paradigm that avoided explicit racial identifications of those considered the legitimate, or relevant, national population groups. In this context, and as a result of the specific historical development of the country, it might be feasible to consider that Afro-descendent people have no place in Mexico's dominant national imaginary, making possible the emergence of a Black figure which is easy to adopt and project on to without any counterweights.

The controversy we want to focus on emerged in 2005, when the Mexican government released five commemorative stamps featuring *Memín Pinguín* to celebrate Mexico's cartoon history. Like the golliwog row in the United Kingdom, this also created an intense debate within the media because of its racial and racist connotations, but had opposing consequences in terms of the commercial implications and social 'lessons': *Memín Pinguín*'s 750,000 issued stamps sold out within days and the seventh edition of the comic was reissued (Camacho Servín, 2005; Mateos-Vega, 2005).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the debate included a fierce defense of the children's character by the Mexican intellectual elite (Krauze, 2005; Poniatowska, in Palapa Quijas, Montaña Garfías and Mateos-Vega, 2005; Monsiváis, 2008) and a condemnation of the international commentary, mainly coming from the USA, which labeled the issuing of these stamps (and the government behind them) as racist.<sup>9</sup> Thus the cases of *Memín Pinguín* and Thatcher's golliwog doll bear witness to how Mexican racial disavowal and British racial recognition are both entangled in hegemonic discourses that allow for racist practices. These two cases raise an important consideration regarding the potential to undermine racism that a banner of creolization could promote.

Such consideration refers to the prevalence of the phenomenon of racelessness as a trend already being detected in various contexts, including the USA, Europe and Mexico, and the implications it has for tackling racism. Studies of racism in Mexico (and in other parts of Latin America) have started to grapple with the issue of public racial recognition in a context where racelessness prevails (Moreno Figueroa, 2010). David T. Goldberg's (2002) concept of racelessness is useful here because it allows us to understand the processes of racial and racist normalization evident in the Mexican context, and also apparent in Europe (Lentin, 2008; 2012;

8 See *Memín Pinguín* webpage, with Facebook and Twitter options: [www.meminpinguin.com](http://www.meminpinguin.com). Accessed March 4, 2015.

9 'US: Mexican stamp fuels "racial stereotypes"', NBC News (June 30, 2005) [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8410111/ns/world\\_news-americas/t/us-mexican-stamp-fuels-racial-stereotypes](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8410111/ns/world_news-americas/t/us-mexican-stamp-fuels-racial-stereotypes). Accessed January 21, 2015.

El-Tayeb, 2011). In his analysis of race relations in the USA, Goldberg (2002, 261) refers to racelessness as the absence 'of formal racial invocation from state agency and state personality', while at the same time certain dynamics of social, economic and political life are fashioned by racial understandings. This particular position of the state allows it to structure racelessness while denying its responsibility for the impact of such racial shaping. 'Racelessness, in short, traded on the fact that race became so readily, one might say universally, assumed' (Goldberg, 2002, 257). As Monica Moreno Figueroa (2010) argues elsewhere, the notion of 'racelessness' and Goldberg's analysis of the USA is useful to frame Mexico's racial discourse of *mestizaje*, the lack of public discourse on racism and its endemic denial that seems to be caught between a commitment to formal equality and the uncritical reproduction of state rationality regarding 'race'. Marisol De la Cadena (2001, 16), and Alan Knight (1990) before her, argue that in Latin America it is common to confront 'the relative ease with which pervasive and very visible discriminatory practices coexist with the denial of racism'. For De la Cadena, it is the racialization of Latin American culture that has enabled the 'denied' reproduction of racist practices. Here, discourse denies racism but upholds cultural differences. This is how we can explain that racist practices actively invade people's lives despite the professed absence of racism in Mexican culture, the inclusiveness of *mestizaje*'s racial project. The effectiveness of these practices relies on their capacity to normalize certain social conditions as well as ways of thinking and acting. This is the core of the notion of 'racelessness' where it is possible to locate the figure of *Memín Pinguín* as loveable and unproblematic.

The analysis we want to put forward here, then, points out that the lack of racial recognition in Mexico is related to a conjuncture of factors including the complexity of everyday racism entangled with structural racial and class privilege and a state discourse favoring multiculturalism while simultaneously embracing *mestizaje*. Overall, the protracted separation of 'race', ethnicity and nation in social, governmental and academic discourse over the last century has created a situation where racism is not recognized institutionally or publicly, but is lived as individual experience and relegated to this realm. The process of 'individualization' of racism as a personal experience has been exacerbated by the banner of multiculturalism and the recognition of individual rights for Indigenous people, and more recently of Afro-Mexican groups. This trend, also present in Europe, appears as validating the variety of ethnic groups in the country while at the same time seems to be wanting to bypass the recognition of the institutionalization and everyday normalization of racism. The *Memín Pinguín* case exemplifies how practices of racism and racist comments are rife and usually go uncontested, or, at best, unrecognized. Also, it shows how a project that celebrates the multicultural origins of the nation not only feeds into and reproduces racist discourse, but is a racist project in itself.

### *Memín Pinguín: the debate*

In 2005, the pervasiveness of racism in the Mexican political, intellectual and academic elites as well as within popular sectors came to public light with the unfortunate comments of the then President Vicente Fox about the Mexican population in the USA. Fox claimed that the Mexicans take the jobs 'that not even the Blacks want to do',<sup>10</sup> generating a strong critique inside and outside Mexico. This was further accentuated when, as part of the celebration of Mexican cartoon history, the government approved the release by the Mexican Postal Service of five commemorative stamps featuring the character *Memín Pinguín*, which were regarded as fueling 'racist stereotypes'.<sup>11</sup>

The debate sparked the sale of all 750,000 stamps in a couple of days (some people taking advantage and reselling the five stamps for up to US\$70 instead of their face value of US\$3.25) and prompted the reissuing of the seventh edition of the comic (Camacho Servín, 2005, Mateos-Vega, 2005). What is interesting in these two events – the President's comments and the stamps of *Memín* – was that while few raised their voices to defend or justify President Fox's racist remarks, the spectrum of personalities that jumped to the defense of *Memín* was telling. While both incidents were brought to public attention in response to protests raised within the USA, largely by members of the African American community, only in the *Memín Pinguín* case, were Mexican intellectuals, along with the thousands of people that ran to buy the stamps, up in arms against US condemnation.<sup>12</sup> The Mexican media and intellectual elite, from both ends of the political spectrum, tried to play down racism and explain Mexico's non-racist national character, accusing the USA of being interventionist with its remarks.<sup>13</sup> They tried to justify and defend Mexico's racism in terms of either historical mestizaje (referring exclusively to the Indigenous population and excluding the Afro-Mexican population) or naive, harmless ignorance (Palapa Quijas, 2005).

So, for example, famous Mexican public figures, like historian Enrique Krauze (2005), defended these stamps and *Memín* as a 'highly pleasing

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10 'Realizan mexicanos trabajos que ni los negros quieren: Fox', *La Jornada* (May 14, 2005) (archived page) <https://web.archive.org/web/20080419113328/http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2005/05/14/008n1pol.php>. Accessed January 21, 2015. For an example of the critiques to his comments, see: 'Rechazan palabras de Vicente Fox', BBC Mundo (May 17, 2005) [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/international/newsid\\_4553000/4553217.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/international/newsid_4553000/4553217.stm).

11 See n. 9, above.

12 Bobby Vaughn and BenVinson III (2008) find an interesting analysis of the connection between these two events.

13 Few raised the need to look beyond this event to the supporting social framework that keeps silencing the pervasive Mexican daily racism. See Katz, 2007.

image rooted in Mexican popular culture'; while progressive novelist Elena Poniatowska remarked

En nuestro país la imagen de los negros despierta una simpatía enorme, que se refleja no sólo en personajes como Memín Pinguín, sino en canciones populares. Hasta Cri Cri creó su negrito sandía. En México, a diferencia de lo que sucede en Estados Unidos, nuestro trato hacia los negros ha sido más cariñoso. (Quoted in Palapa Quijas, Montaña Garfías and Mateos-Vega, 2005)

[In our country the image of Blacks awakens a huge sympathy, which is reflected not only in characters like Memín Pinguín, but also in popular songs. Even Cri Cri [*a famous Mexican children's songwriter*] created his 'little Black watermelon boy' song. In Mexico, in contrast to what happens in the USA, we have treated Blacks in a more kindly way.]<sup>14</sup>

Poniatowska's remarks echo the dominant belief that Mexico's treatment of Black people has been more benign and endearing than in the USA. This belief and common stereotype is made possible through the silencing in public discourse of the existence of Blacks, Afro-Mexicans or Afro-Mestizos. First, by the dominant idea that the Afro-descendent population in Mexico is not relevant as it has disappeared 'thanks' to the process of integration as part of the project of *mestizaje*. This process of invisibility has long since been denounced by, for example, anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán's (1972 [1946]) seminal work on the black population in Mexico in the 1940s. Secondly, the belief in a benign Mexican racism has been accompanied by a state policy that has hesitated in its recognition of Afro-descendent people. For example, the fact that during colonial times more slaves entered the country than Spanish is not widely known. While there are differing statistical population counts, the figures are telling. According to Robert V. Kemper (1995), during the 300-year colonial period, very few Spaniards moved to what was then Mexico, that is New Spain – from 250,000 to 300,000, although there was an average maximum of only 60,000 at any given time. The Aztec empire comprised twenty-five million people, a number that decreased dramatically from 1520 to 1650 owing to warfare and diseases, until its lowest point, of 3,300,000 Indigenous peoples, in 1570. However, the Indigenous population, composed of diverse linguistic and cultural groups, remained the largest percentage of the population of New Spain and its dependencies, followed by the *castas* or *mestizo* groups. Regarding those of African descent, Alan Knight (2002) claims that African slaves were the core of the colonial labor projects since they could guarantee a permanent and skilled labor force (see also Bennett, 2009).

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14 Translations are the authors' own.

[S]o between 1521 and 1594 some 36,500 black slaves were shipped to Mexico, the first batch of 200,000 who would be imported throughout three centuries of colonial rule. Many – perhaps 40 percent in the 1570s – lived in Mexico City, where they graced rich households as servants and drivers; others became hacienda and mining foremen; while in coastal Veracruz and Guerrero, black and mulatto communities sprang up, where they have remained to this day. (Knight, 2002, 17)

Kemper (1995, 538) suggests that, by 1810, it was likely that just over 10,000 people of African descent lived in New Spain ‘although in the same year the census registered 600,000 people of *afromestizo* groups’ (Kemper, 1995, 538), signaling the growth of the mixed population. In any case, both authors, Knight and Kemper, stress the significant presence of people of African descent in New Spain.

An interesting element of the *Memín Pinguín* controversy is then how it disregards this historical context, and with this the possibility of discussing the presence of peoples of African descent in Mexico and, more importantly, their social conditions and continuous exclusion. In addition, there is no acknowledgement that the claims are not just coming from an abstract USA, but are being voiced by the African American community, via public figures such as Reverend Jesse Jackson, long-standing civil rights movement activist.<sup>15</sup> So, when some have maintained that the problem generated around this case is due to US intervention threatening Mexican sovereignty, we can also see how we are confronted with a Mexican nationalist response that fails to acknowledge racism and dismisses the African American community and not only Bush’s administration, then in power.

This is clearly revealed in an article (2008) published by acclaimed leftist Mexican intellectual Carlos Monsiváis, who, while reflecting on this case, is outraged by the accusations coming from the USA, and denied the racist implications of *Memín Pinguín* (we will come back to this in more detail). Monsiváis is a highly regarded critic of the nation’s social, cultural and political life. Known as a chronicler of street life and popular culture, he gave voice to Mexico’s minorities and oppressed while challenging those who abused their power. He is known for his analytical and often satirical descriptions of Mexico City’s popular culture and has become an obligatory reference for any study of modern popular culture in Mexico. How then do we explain his failure to see that *Memín* was not only a medium through which the elite reproduced power and gender relations but also racial hierarchies? How could somebody known for his critical eye for understanding the subtle and unsaid so quickly dismiss the issue of race?

We need to consider carefully the implications of these intellectuals’

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15 ‘Outcry over Mexican stamps’, *Guardian* (July 1, 2005) [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/jul/01/mexico](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/jul/01/mexico). Accessed March 19, 2012.

arguments and understand why they were not willing to engage with a rationale of 'race' and racism to explain the case. One first explanation can be that a key element of Mexico's ideology of *mestizaje* is the denial of racism and that, since *mestizaje* departs from the idea of mixed origins, 'race' is not a relevant social category. Although we agree in principle with this explanation, in the following section we want to bring a more nuanced analysis to the table. We will revisit the meanings of *mestizaje*, *mestiza* identity and 'race' in light of the Memín event to draw further conclusions about the consequences of processes of institutionalization of racial and cultural mixture and, in that way, contribute to the debates about the project of creolizing Europe.

### Mestizaje as a 'National Project'

It is our argument that the reasons why issues of racism are easily dismissed in Mexico lie in the racial project of *mestizaje*, particularly the enactment of it that was coined after the Mexican Revolution (1910) as part of the nation-building project. It is this enactment with which people like Monsiváis, Krause and Poniatowska do not critically engage. As explained elsewhere, *mestizaje* is a multilayered term which describes both the biological and social and cultural 'mixing' of Spanish, African and Amerindian peoples, and an official discourse that emerges as a key component of the ideological myth of formation of the Mexican nation and its subject, the *mestizo* (Moreno Figueroa, 2010; 2011). Both categories – *mestizaje* and *mestiza* identity – are a direct consequence of the ways in which racial discourses developed in Mexico.<sup>16</sup> *Mestizo* as the subject of national identity was then presented as the embodiment of the 'promise of improvement through race mixture for individuals and the nation' (Wade, 2001, 849). Moreover, in such a project of state formation, 'Mexican' is equivalent to *mestizo*. Identifying as *mestiza* or *mestizo* refers to those who *represent* Mexicanness and, therefore, those who are closer to the model of the ideal subjects of the Mexican *mestizo* nation. This correlation is quite similar to the ways in which whiteness, white bodies and national belonging in Europe are also framed (McVeigh, 2010; El-Tayeb, 2011). *Mestizaje*, as this ideological framework, boosts an implied rhetoric of inclusiveness while concealing processes of exclusion and racism 'based on the idea of the inferiority of blacks and indigenous peoples and, in practice, of discrimination against them' (Wade, 2001, 849). *Mestiza* is then seen as a term both relatively 'neutral' (that is, all Mexicans are *mestizos*) but also as highly 'loaded', as it implies possibilities of inclusion and exclusion to the national myth

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16 For a more detailed discussion, see Curiel, 2005; Gargallo, 2005; Ortiz Pinchetti, 2005; Vargas, 2005.

of a homogenous population. Moreover, it is the ideology coined by the liberal elites that created a sense of unity and belonging without the need for the recognition of Indigenous peoples and Afro-Mexicans. All other minorities that have migrated to Mexico throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods, and whose experiences are being recently documented, have also been excluded (Bonfil Batalla, 1993), such as Jews (Gleizer Salzman, 2000, 2013), Gypsies (Pérez Romero, 2001), Chinese (Hu-Dehart, 1980) and Lebanese (Páez Oropeza, 1984).

As Emiko Saldivar argues elsewhere, the racial project of *mestizaje* played important roles in the social formation of twentieth-century Mexico in the following ways. First, it became the cornerstone of national identity. Second, it facilitated a racial policy based on the assimilation and integration of the Indigenous and Afro-Mexican peoples (and other migrant groups) such that their specific problems, demands and presence were silenced. Third, it provided a way to forge ideas of equality while maintaining an economy based on dramatic inequality. Fourth, it justified differentiated development policies under the construction of economic regions based on ethno-racial groups. Fifth, ideas of *mestizaje* shaped new understandings of differences and how to relate to them (Saldivar, 2014).

With this background it becomes clearer how most of the arguments presented to defend Memín's innocuous character and cartoon can be grouped in three recurring themes: (1) a patriotic defense against US intervention; (2) the 'comforting' commonsensical argument that Memín is part of Mexican popular culture; and (3) the assertion that 'race' is not the problem but class. All three themes constitute parts of the racial ideology of *mestizaje* of the early to mid-twentieth century with strong continuities and repercussions in early twenty-first-century Mexico. Also, these themes give clues of some of the consequences of the institutionalization of cultural mixture. We now turn briefly to discuss these three recurring themes.

### **'Gringos – greens go home': *mestizaje* against US intervention<sup>17</sup>**

The combination of national pride and anti-US sentiment has been part of the tense relationship between both countries, particularly since the Mexican–American War (1846–1848), when Mexico lost half of its territory. This event had a profound impact on Mexico's national consciousness. While in the previous forty years of independence, since 1810, the country had

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17 'Gringo' is a popular vernacular term use to refer to people from the USA and has now extended to most white foreigners. Folk etymology claims that people would say to the US soldiers in the Mexican–American War, "greens go home", in reference to their uniform.

witnessed endless internal armed conflicts, which a weak central state had struggled to contain, following the Mexican–American War a new national sentiment emerged. After the ‘shared’ experience of the war, patriotic and nationalist feelings became popular among the Mexican elites. National symbols were used to create a sense of belonging and unity in a society profoundly divided owing to many years of conflict (Vieira Powers, 2002). It is in this period when the idea of the national subject overtook the *criollo* figure,<sup>18</sup> and the racial and cultural concept of *mestizaje* and Mexicanness became popular. More importantly, Mexico used its ‘kinder’ treatment of Indigenous people and the early abolition of slavery as a central point of comparison between the USA’s racist segregationist culture and Mexico’s ‘inclusive and just’ *mestizaje*.

*Mestizaje* was also a racial counter-discourse, promoted by the ruling elites, to ideas of purity and ‘white’ hegemonic discourses emanating from European and US scientific racism, Social Darwinism and eugenics. This was an idea that took an important populist twist after the armed rebellion of the 1910s – what has been called the Mexican Revolution – by becoming, once again, a unifying force. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the racial ideology of *mestizaje* started being a reference for the Mexican elite’s efforts to achieve national unity and identity. It is at this same time that Gobineau’s (1816–82) racial theories were being discussed in his natal France and throughout Europe during the peak of scientific racism. Ana Maria Alonso (2004, 461) stresses how *mestizaje* in Latin America became a key example of nineteenth-century European theoretical discussions about hybridity. In the context of Spencerian sociology, which stated that ‘hybrid societies were unstable and disorganised’, questions about the impact of *mixing* on the ‘degeneration’ of the population and the status of Latin American societies in the international context had a huge influence on Mexican elites. Some of the precepts of racial thought during the government of Dictator Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911) were shaken during the revolution that followed his ruling period, as the armed rebellion challenged the old representations of the rural indigenous population. The rise of the masses called for new perspectives and analytical frameworks to explain new social dynamics and articulate old liberal agendas to emerging social actors. During the post-revolutionary period the state developed a political agenda based on ideas of social justice and economic growth. In order to achieve this, the state promoted the creation of a new citizen that would result from the process of *mestizaje*. This new citizen would be a member of the so-called ‘cosmic race’ proposed by the influential intellectual and then Minister of Education, José Vasconcelos (1948). Like Brazil’s idea of ‘racial democracy’ (Twine, 1998;

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18 *Criollo* (Creole in English), here refers to the ‘pure’ descendants of Iberian people, who, during the colonial period, were at the top of the hierarchical social order and then led much of the Independence War.



Motta, 2000; Telles, 2004), the mestizo project was seen as the representation of equality and justice in which the old caste-like system would be erased by the appropriate mixing of population favoring whitening processes and moving towards a class-based social organization. This race-based project was supposed to overcome the racist ideology that predominated before the Revolution. It is no wonder, then, that this context breeds a kind of national pride and claims of sovereignty, which while aiming to assert a position of unity also does not 'let go' of the injured past and at the same time obscure national dynamics of inequality that need addressing independently anyway.

### Neo-liberalism and the celebration of difference

In the late 1980s, as the post-revolutionary state project became obsolete owing to new neo-liberal measures that prompted cuts in public and social spending, the national project of mestizaje came under scrutiny after demands for more democracy and social participation. In response, writers such as Roger Bartra (1987), Carmen Boullosa (1992) Carlos and Fuentes (1993), among others, revisited the founding idea of Mexico as the result of a traumatic event. For them, Mexico was not only the '*hijo de la chingada*' – son of the raped indigenous women – but it represented the encounter of a rich mix of cultures, peoples and human complexities. With this position they were advocating a pluralistic understanding of contemporary Mexico. During a deep economic and political crisis, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–94) embraced pluralism as the central force for a 'new-democratic' and free-market Mexico. A series of legal reforms would grant political pluralism and the recognition of Mexico as a pluri-cultural nation. Nevertheless, as the Zapatista Indigenous uprising of 1994 made clear, these lukewarm concessions did not directly address the pressing poverty and lack of political recognition of the Indigenous population of the country. Moreover, the economic and legal measures to open the market to transnational investments have disenfranchised Indigenous peoples even more. The Zapatista uprising would bring about profound reconfigurations in the relations between Indigenous peoples, the state and society at large. It would also make visible the shortcomings of the mestizaje project, presenting alternative understandings of pluri-culturalism and multiculturalism, understandings that would connect social inequality with race and ethnic discrimination.

These events have brought significant changes in the politics and visibility of race and ethnicity in Mexico. For example, in the 2010 census, 19 percent of the population identified as Indigenous, a considerable increase from the 2000 census, where the total amount was 12 percent. Nevertheless, the *Memín Pinguín* incident is an important wake-up call of how recognition of differences, legally and socially, is not a bullet-proof antidote against racism. This takes us to the next point we want to elaborate on: popular racism.

### Popular racism: mestizaje as the project of the 'people'

To consider popular racism is to look at the ways in which a racial project takes hold in people's imaginaries and everyday lives through its articulation with popular culture making the emergence of a character such as Memín Pinguín possible. The new project of official mestizaje that emerged in Mexico after the Revolution of 1910 had the mestizo subject at its center as the building force of its project of modernity and progress. Moreover, owing to the emergence of a new political elite (mostly from the mestizo ranks) and the clear claims for social justice, this new mestizo was portrayed as the embodiment of both the demand for social justice as well as for the political and economic modernization of the country. The most monumental examples of this are Diego Rivera's (1886–1957) murals. Out of the ashes of the Revolution, Rivera would produce the imagery that became not only the official image of the state but the murals were commissioned with the idea of educating and teaching the illiterate 'masses' about their national history.

The 'education of the masses' became a central task for the post-revolutionary state, well into the 1980s. Public education was a vital force in the expansion of the federal state into the most remote and isolated parts of Mexico. Official education was also accompanied by the profound belief that the 'masses' not only needed to learn to read, write and build a patriotic spirit, but it was also important to educate them with 'modern' values to leave behind their 'religious and local fears'. This 'moral education' of the masses was undertaken by the growing cultural industry, especially radio, the film and television industries and the press. *Memín Pinguín* was very much part of such efforts. According to Monsiváis, the comic created in 1947 became one device for such moral and civic education. The 372 chapters of the comic have been republished and re-edited several times, having sold twenty-five million copies monthly in 1978 (Palapa Quijas, 2005). The story told by the creators and publishers of the comic (Editorial Group Vid), is very much embedded in this education effort. For example, Manelick De la Parra, general director of the publishing company, and son of the original script writer of the comic Vargas Dulché, recalled in an interview how in the 1950s Memín was a means to learn how to read: 'Si logró que por curiosidad, niños y adultos, aprendieran a leer para saber qué le pasaba a Memín' [Out of curiosity, he got both children and adults to learn how to read to find out what was happening to Memín] (Palapa Quijas, 2005).

Another aspect of this popular racism is evident through the overwhelming support for the stamps shown by the massive turn-out in post offices throughout the country on the day they went on sale. 'Since the World Cup in 1986 we had never seen this many people', affirmed a post office employee (quoted in Camacho Servín, 2005). This support is further expressed in a sense of historical continuity rooted in the access to the comic. As one man said after enduring an hour-long line to acquire the

famous stamps, 'Mi abuela leía Memín, mi mamá también; yo lo leí, crecí con él y ahora también mi hijo' [My grandmother used to read Memín, my mother too; I read it, I grew up with him and now my son does too] (quoted in Camacho Servín, 2005).

So, what is it about *Memín Pinguín* that makes the comic so popular? An element that contributes to this popularization is precisely the normalization of racism within the comic. The ways the Black body is addressed and how it comes to embody the figure of the 'good but foolish' Black, much in line with the famous US 'picaninny' figure:

Picaninnies had bulging eyes, unkempt hair, red lips, and wide mouths into which they stuffed huge slices of watermelon. They were themselves tasty morsels for alligators. They were routinely shown on postcards, posters, and other ephemera being chased or eaten. Picaninnies were portrayed as nameless, shiftless, natural buffoons. (Pilgrim, 2000)

We can see this normalization in the Mexican public surprise when the subject of *Memín Pinguín* being a racist comic arises again in the USA in 2008 when members of the African American community complained that the supermarket chain Wal-Mart was selling it. De la Parra, director of the Memín publishing company, said:

Es increíble que protesten contra Memín Pinguín, personaje que lucha contra la discriminación y que resalta la belleza espiritual por encima del aspecto físico, pero no dicen nada contra algunas de las películas de Eddie Murphy que se venden también en Wal-Mart y que, ésas sí, ridiculizan a los afro estadounidenses con personajes que se convierten en mujeres de más de 400 kilogramos de peso. Tenemos tres años de vender las historietas de Memín Pinguín en Estados Unidos y nunca habíamos tenido problemas. Pero, al parecer, algunos tienen sus motivos políticos y se empeñan en ver racismo donde no lo hay. (Manelick de la Parra, quoted in Arceo, 2008)

[It is incredible that people protest against Memín Pinguín, a character who fights against discrimination and highlights spiritual beauty over physical appearance, but they don't say anything against some of Eddie Murphy's films, which are also sold at Wal-Mart and that really ridicule African Americans, with characters that become women weighing 400 kilos. We have been selling *Memín Pinguín* comics for three years and we never had problems before. But, it seems, some have political motives and are adamant about seeing racism where there is none.]

This intervention is interesting as it reveals the extent of the public invisibility and related lack of sensitivity towards racism. One of the key points here is de la Parra's assertion that Memín is a character who does not comment on

or care about physical appearance and fights against discrimination. And we may concede that, yes, of course he does not comment on his physical features, as he has to be continuously dealing with his animalistic and buffoon-like portrayal and the condescending way he is set up in particular social and power dynamics within the comic. So, for example, in an episode ('El Estrelló', *Memín Pinguín* 6) where Memín and his group of three friends are on a school trip to Teotihuacan (a key archeological site in Mexico), we see Memín embellished by the backdrop of the pyramids while saying that he feels 'Teohaticano' (Vargas Dulché, 2012), which is some sort of combination of being from Teotihuacan but also being Haitian.<sup>19</sup> He is then put on the spot, as he usually is throughout the comic. When Memín asks about how to produce a report about the visit, his friend Carlos calls him 'zoquete' (dumb) because he doesn't understand what he has to do and thinks it is very difficult. Carlos then 'kindly' encourages him to do the report saying that he cannot believe he is such a brute. But there is no comeback, no challenge of the implication and reaffirmation of hierarchies, either from Memín or from the teacher, who has been listening to this exchange.

### 'Race' is not the problem, but class ...

Furthermore, and as Monsiváis (2008, 2) correctly points out, Memín is inextricably 'linked from its beginning to the observation of poverty or wealth that destroy families and forces single mothers to wash huge piles of someone else's clothes so they can give some education to their children'. It is to this consideration of class-but-not-race that we turn our attention now. In his article reflecting on the debate around *Memín Pinguín*, Monsiváis (2008) claims that class was the real issue. This argument is not unique to Mexico and can be seen in the cases of Brazil, Britain and elsewhere where notions of 'race' have become so mainstream giving the 'illusion' that only class matters.<sup>20</sup> While the cartoon emphasizes the prominent lips of the character, he says that, really,

[L]a mirada no es racista. El tema central del cómic no es la epidermis 'quemada' sino la clase social. Memín es objeto de burla pero no de

19 This fortuitous allusion to Haiti could be read in reference to this country's visibility in the media after the 2010 earthquake. Reinforcing, once again, the idea that 'blackness' is something foreign while in tension with the presence of Memín in Mexico.

20 Moreover, it is worth noticing that this correlation between class and race has been a common view since the 1997–2010 British Labour government's Communities Minister John Denholme made such a claim for the UK situation in 2010. See 'Time for new approach to race relations, minister urges', *Guardian* (January 14, 2010) [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/14/john-denham-race-relations?intcmp=239](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/14/john-denham-race-relations?intcmp=239). Accessed March 24, 2012.

exclusión, y los chistes son los previsibles. ¿De dónde vienen, entonces, las acusaciones de ‘racista’? (Monsiváis, 2008, 3)

[The gaze is not racist. The central theme of the comic is not the ‘burned’ skin but social class. Memín is ridiculed but not excluded, and the jokes are the predictable ones. Where then do the accusations of ‘racist’ come from?]

For Monsiváis, the accusations of racism at the heart of the stamps controversy come mainly from ignorance about the history of the comic as a complex and popular product of Mexico’s cultural industry that values the portrayal of what it means to be a ‘good son’. Monsiváis argues that what gives strength to the comic is the fact that it is constructed in the genre of melodrama and its soap-opera-like feeling. Memín ‘is strictly a quaint, charming fact’ (Monsiváis, 2008, 3) and, as such, he gathers around him, for Monsiváis, the really pressing issue of class distinctions. For example, in an episode when Carlos, Memín’s friend, is urged by his rich father to leave his poor mother to come and live with him, Monsiváis interprets Carlos’s rejection of this proposal as honoring the tradition of the pleasure of suffering, and of course, the idealization of the mother.

What Monsiváis misses in his insightful commentary is that in his interpretation of popular class and gender relations as melodramatic there is also a clear racial construction of social relations. As described above, Memín ‘el negrito’ [the little Black one] and his mother stand out as different from the rest. The wealthy (Ricardo and his family) are always portrayed as whiter, and the ‘popular’ characters (Carlangas and Ernestillo) are mestizo (interestingly, there are no Indigenous characters, possibly because the comic is supposed to represent urban mestizo Mexico where, the stereotype goes, there is none).

For Monsiváis, the accusation that the comic is racist is a continuation from President Fox’s comment that the Mexicans in the USA take the jobs ‘that not even Blacks want to do’, but, more importantly, he insists that this accusation of racism is just ‘la gana de transferir el racismo propio a la sociedad ajena’ [the desire to transfer racism to somebody else’s society] (Monsiváis, 2008, 3).<sup>21</sup> While it is clear that Monsiváis wants to make a point about the interference of the Bush administration (and the African American community via Jesse Jackson), from whom the strongest criticisms to the printing of the stamps emerged, he misses the point and the opportunity to critique some internal issues about the multiplicity of

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21 The idea that ‘race’ is a concept imported from outside is common among Mexican intellectuals. See, for example, Vieira Powers, 2002; Moreno Figueroa, 2008; Lomnitz, 2010.

forms of racism in Mexico.<sup>22</sup> Is it really possible to argue, as he does, that 'Los lectores mexicanos de hace sesenta años o del año pasado no habrían tolerado un cómic abiertamente racista' [The Mexican readership from sixty years ago or from last year wouldn't have tolerated an openly racist comic] (Monsiváis, 2008, 3). It is our argument that this assumption is wrong. The Mexican readership has not realized that the comic is racist and, yes, they have tolerated it (very similar to the reactions and controversy around the comic book *Tintin* in Belgium).<sup>23</sup> Monsiváis's naive analysis is remarkable. For example, he argues that while in the *Our Gang* films racism is evident in the exceptional treatment of the 'negrito', this is not the case in the comic where Memín 'is a strictly a quaint, charming fact. He is not the inferior one; he is simply the different one, that's it' (Monsiváis, 2008, 3). What does it mean for someone to be described as a quaint, charming piece of data? Simply being the different one? How can we critically accept that 'difference' when invoked in relation to racial issues is exempt from value?

In Monsiváis's understanding, the fact that Memín is constantly bullied and his best friends, while making degrading remarks about his body, his features and his intellectual capacities, are not excluding him, is quite telling about the ways in which racism is lived in Mexico. Monsiváis's (2008, 3) definition of racism is tidy: 'racism, amongst other characteristics, is the accumulation of discriminatory actions that are justified and demanded by prejudice, and is the operation of choosing subjects to be ridiculed'. While we would not have any disagreement with this, to then insist that the Memín comic is not racist, and that the issue is class unrelated to racism, is debatable. Here, we are not talking about a segregationist context where racism works radically to exclude Black people from mainstream life. On the contrary, in Mexico we are encountering a 'raceless' situation where the joke, the friendly banter, the fun, can be accomplished without major consequences. This means that the premise of saying or doing this '*con cariño*' (with kindness) establishes a status quo where racism can be slipped underground and the ways in which it is related to other forms of exclusion such as sexism or class distinctions are rendered invisible. It is what Mary Jackman (1994) calls domination without an expression of hostility.

Most class-based analyses start from the idea of 'conflict', that is, that society is organized around class conflict. Such work fails to recognize that long-term discrimination, especially along the lines of class, gender and race, do not show open conflict: on the contrary, the elites are very invested

22 Paradoxically, in the same publication where Monsiváis (2008) defended *Memín Pinguín* against US intervention, other academics wrote incisive analyzes of the same event and the overall situation of racism in Mexico and Latin America more generally. See Vaughn and Vinson III, 2008; Velázquez Gutiérrez, 2008.

23 See 'Belgium court rules Tintin does not break racism law', Reuters (February 13, 2012). [www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/13/tintin-belgium-racism-idUSL5E8DD2GY20120213](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/13/tintin-belgium-racism-idUSL5E8DD2GY20120213). Accessed March 30, 2012.

in avoiding it. As Jackman (1994, 8) points out, 'When a relationship is regularized and institutionalized, it is simply a case of "*c'est la vie*". Personal acts of aggression are not required to claim one's due as a member of the advantaged group: 'benefits simply fall into one's lap'. Given that racism in Mexico has been normalized through the ideology of *mestizaje*, benign depictions of discrimination and racial hierarchies are seen as part of the given, the status quo, making it easy to oversee the intrinsic relationship between racial and class discrimination. Both of these, together with gender discrimination, are the cement, the stickiness, that keeps in place a system of privilege and domination that benefits only a few. The elites do so by either playing down the existence of domination and the privilege and benefits that this brings to them or disguising these relationships with expressions of love and care for the dominated group and the appreciation of 'their exotic culture'. 'The everyday practice of discrimination', writes Jackman, 'does not require feelings of hostility, and, indeed, it is not at all difficult to have fond regard for those whom we subordinate, especially when the subject of our domination accedes to the relationship compliantly' (Jackman, 1994, 10).<sup>24</sup> Consequently, Krauze can justify *Memín Pinguín* as a 'highly pleasing image', a remark that is validated by the overwhelming popular support for both the comic and the stamps. *Mestizaje* and more recently multiculturalism are the sugar coating that makes both elites and dominated peoples believe that they are all united under the harmony of diversity and recognition. This is, indeed, a particularly relevant warning to be taken into account when observing developments towards the institutionalization of a discourse of inclusion in Europe that does not challenge its underlying racist assumptions about difference under its obligation 'to find expression through the language of *multiculturalism* and *anti-racism*' (Pitcher, 2006, 537).

## Conclusion

One of the key aspects of *mestizaje* and creolization projects, and later multiculturalism, is their take on difference. For Édouard Glissant, whose notion this book aims overall to address, creolization moves away from 'pure extremes' or 'unique origins' to focus on the possibilities of interrelation, hybridity and openness. (Glissant, in Dash, 1995, 148; references omitted). He has a vision of global creolization and, in J. Michael Dash's (1995, 148) words, 'His vision of an inexhaustible hybridity is an ideological breakthrough'. Dash (148) argues that it is due to moving away from 'ideas of cultural purity, racial authenticity and ancestral origination, [that] Glissant provides a way out of the temptation to relapse into identitarian thought'.

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24 See also De la Cadena, 2008 for an illustrative example of these phenomena in Mexico.

With all the caveats mentioned at the start of this chapter, this is nonetheless a similar proposal to that of understanding an everyday lived *mestizaje* experience, a historical racial, cultural and political process, alongside its official companion. For Mexico, the goal of official *mestizaje* was the fusion of differences and diversities into one unit, responding to a particular modernization project where assimilation and homogenization were important. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, stands for the recognition and celebration of diversity, responding to what David Harvey (1989) has called the 'postmodern condition', where flexible accumulation depends also on the creation of diverse niches of consumption. However, following Grassin's theory of creolization, this emerges in contrast to multiculturalism. He goes further to claim that

What distinguishes creolisation from multiculturalism is that it is not a combination or a mixture of identities; it even goes beyond *metisage* and hybridization to open up on a still-to-be-known consciousness of man in his social, historical, economic, artistic evolution. (Grassin, 2012, 112)

Much is being written, said and done under these three understandings of diversity and how to deal with it. In Mexico, the 'issue of diversity' or '*la cuestión indígena*' [the Indigenous issue] has informed public policy, national agendas and social resistance. In the last three decades, ideas about Indigenous peoples have shifted from being a 'problem' that had to be assimilated to greater tolerance and recognition. This is a trend of visibility which has also been extended, not without problems, to Afro-Mexicans. Although this shift represents important and profound changes for Mexico, there is a persistent continuity in both ways of approaching difference: the belief that it is in the 'managing' of difference that we can find an answer to racism. As Moon-Kie Jung (2009) correctly points out, difference is not a synonym for inequality or domination, and racism is not a problem of recognition, sympathy or hostility. This has become particularly evident in the aftermath of the wider effects of the civil rights movement, postcolonialism and the considerable gains in the recognition of legal rights for Indigenous and Black peoples and other minorities. In these instances racism is far from being eradicated.

This analysis has raised important questions about the possibilities and limits of both the project and current processes of creolizing Europe. By bringing attention to a historical context that has embraced mixing and *mestizaje*, integration, pluri-culture and multicultural, albeit with different degrees of success, we have signaled how issues of difference, inclusion and racism keep shifting their grounds. An exercise in imagining effective political interventions that aim to work towards an inclusive Europe, be it creolized or *mestiza*, needs to bear in mind the workings of privilege and the pervasiveness of racism. This chapter has addressed some of the problems that can arise when the state intervenes in the regulation of



difference. The experience of official mestizaje reveals its failure when confronted with an event like the *Memín Pinguín* controversy. However, simultaneously, the experience of official mestizaje also demonstrates its strength in concealing the workings of racism under an apparent national unity. Memín and the golliwog doll remind us first of the fragility of initiatives to manage difference and secondly of how the political embrace of inclusiveness and respect remains to be re-imagined and effectively implemented.

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